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Exporting Idealism: The Right Kind of Intervention

By Harden Smith

"Meddling in the internal affairs of other countries." American foreign policymakers usually take pains to deny such intentions. Yet the economic assistance we provide, the development projects we sponsor, and, above all, the military aid we give to Third World countries are anything but neutral. These programs inevitably affect the internal dynamics of a country, propping up the existing government or setting in motion political changes that may eventually undermine it. The real question is not whether we are interfering in the political life of the Third World. Rather, it's whether our intervention is effective.

Vietnam, Ethiopia, Nicaragua, Iran, El Salvador, Lebanon—the list of countries that have given us grief despite American aid is a long one. Our ostensible purpose in providing aid to these countries has been twofold: to contain the spread of Soviet influences and to promote democracy by encouraging such democratic institutions as a free press, fair elections, trade unions, and representative assemblies. We spend billions, sacrifice both international prestige and countless American lives—and often end up with little to show for it.

Why do we keep failing? While second-guessing is easy, I think a major reason is our failure to do *enough* meddling in these countries' internal affairs. Or, more precisely, we restrict our intervention to economic and social programs, hoping that well-fed people will not turn to the Soviets and that grassroots social programs will build responsive political institutions at the national level.

Economic aid obviously can be helpful, and not only in feeding malnourished villagers or building a new school or hospital. The economic and social assistance undertaken by John F. Kennedy's Alliance for Progress in Latin America, for example, helped solidify the democratic institutions of Costa Rica. But when such efforts go unaccompanied by the right kind of political action, they can produce results contrary to what we seek. Ethiopia, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Libya all have received extensive economic assistance; but because we did not work as hard to strengthen the political institutions in these countries, the results have tended to be negligible at best and sometimes even destructive.

To be sure, some of the problems come with the territory. Economic aid can produce rising expectations among a populace that the nations in question cannot meet. (See "Great Expectations: The Real Cause of Revolution," October 1983.) But we make matters worse when we neglect a developing country's need for institutions that

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can give it a chance to resolve these conflicts and that will ensure that the benefits of our economic and social aid are widely shared. Instead, all too often, our aid strengthens dictators who stand in the way of democratic reform. Witness, among countless other examples, the repressive policies of a President Mobutu of Zaire or a Marcos of the Philippines. In much of the Third World "in place of the Speaker with a wig, there stands a soldier with a gun," as Dennis Austin sadly comments on Britain's ex-colonies in Africa. Our major concern seems to be whether that soldier is on our side.

These days "political action" is a dirty word, suggesting such massive and inept interventions as the Bay of Pigs, the campaign to overthrow Salvador Allende in Chile, and the recent mining of Nicaragua's ports. But political action doesn't have to be this sinister. It can, and should, be a series of small initiatives taken over a long period of time by various arms of the United States government for the purpose of increasing the odds that massive intervention won't be needed later. After all, isn't it better to risk some embarrassment now with our ostensible allies, than to grapple later with the choices that currently confront us in countries such as El Salvador?

There's nothing fancy about this kind of "political action." Just one example: Why wasn't Benigno Aquino of the Philippines invited to the White House before his fateful return to his home country? Such an invitation would have communicated an important message to Ferdinand Marcos: that we sympathize with noncommunist reformers who sincerely desire to promote democratic institutions in that troubled country. Why didn't we let the dictator and his cronies know that there would be a price to pay if Aquino came to harm? Marcos would have been upset, but it's doubtful he would have done anything more than protest. He needs us more than we need him, despite our military bases in the Philippines. Indeed, distancing ourselves from Marcos in such a fashion would have enhanced our ability, in the long run, to keep those bases. To prevent a communist takeover in the Philippines—a possibility that grows each day—we need credibility among Marcos's noncommunist opponents. If they see us solely as obstacles to progress, not only will they write us off as hypocrites; more, they may join with the communists out of desperation—and retaliate against us if they ever assume power.

The United States must stop being defensive, overlooking a regime's authoritarian behavior until a crisis occurs and then invoking the specter of incipient communism. Put another way, as Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge did a quarter-century ago, our foreign policy should promote the Declaration of Independence instead of being constantly on the defensive against the precepts of Karl Marx.

Rice Riot

Having served with the State Department for some years in three countries (Libya, Liberia, and Somalia) where coups have destroyed embryonic democracies, I am left with a very strong sense that we missed our opportunities. Perhaps we would have lost anyway, but our chances would have been much better had we aggressively and directly intervened to assist the democratic process.

Recent events in Liberia are an apt example. One of the oldest nations in Africa—it was founded in 1847 by former American slaves—Liberia at first glance seems more like a success story than one of failure. It is not in the communist camp; in fact, following a brief flirtation with doctrinaire socialism under the military rule of President Samuel K. Doe, it recently has sought to shore up its traditionally friendly relations with the West.

Appearances, however, do not tell the story. Liberian society today is less open, its institutions less "democratic," than they were a generation ago. The government is dominated now by the military, which in turn is dominated by the Kranh, one of the country's 23 tribal groups. Liberia appears to be starting to succumb to the coup-counter-coup cycle that afflicts so many African nations. And in this regard, Liberia is typical: a decade from now we might well look back upon events in Liberia, as we have done with so many other countries, and wonder why our efforts came to naught. Like most of our foreign policy failures, it is not self-evident today, but rather is quietly in the making.

To understand America's missed opportunities in Liberia, some history is in order. The administrations of both William V. S. Tubman (1944-1971) and William Tolbert (1971-1980) represented primarily the interests of a minority oligarchy—the Americo-Liberian establishment that descended from the former slaves who created the country. During the Tubman administration, however, the *direction* of change was toward wider participation by all groups in government and in the economic life of the country. No one would accuse Tubman of being a front man for Common Cause. But he did set in motion a policy of "unification"—participation by all of the country's 23 tribal groups, not just the Americo-Liberians. Early in his administration, Tubman eliminated the dual administrative system that created "counties" along the

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coastline, where the Americos had settled, but consigned the upcountry areas inhabited by other tribal groups to the status of "territories." The heads of two of the country's four security organizations (Tubman believed in checks and balances) were members of indigenous tribes, not Americo-Liberians. Rather than intimidate potential dissidents Tubman coopted them, advancing many of the brightest into government after informants spotted them while still students. Tubman's under-secretary of state, for instance, had been identified as a student radical while studying in the United States.

Tolbert, who succeeded Tubman in 1971, reversed these trends. His brother Stephen, the country's finance minister, capitalized on the power he shared with Tolbert to increase vastly their personal wealth. After touring government lands that were in reserve for future expansion of Monrovia, Liberia's capital, President Tolbert appropriated the best land for himself, invoking a provision of a law intended for unsettled rural land. His brother channeled government purchases to his own companies and intimidated rivals into selling out to him at depressed prices.

With this corruption and the visible shift away from democratization of the political and economic life of Liberia, Tolbert's regime became increasingly vulnerable. When concession negotiations with iron and rubber companies failed to produce expected benefits for Liberia, the public presumed that the companies had bought the Tolberts off. When Tolbert revoked a subsidy on rice, Liberia's basic food, and its price soared, riots broke out in the capital. Tolbert mishandled the riots, and a military coup followed that brought Doe, a former military sergeant, to power.

Where did we go wrong in Liberia? In a multitude of small ways, largely sins of omission rather than commission. For instance, we could have insisted, even before the end of Tubman's administration, on a different focus for our economic assistance projects, directing more to tribal areas and less to Monrovia. The existing aid patterns merely increased the resentment of tribal groups that traditionally had been excluded. Instead of building the huge and understaffed W. V. S. Tubman Memorial Hospital in downtown Monrovia, as the government wanted, we could have insisted that our dollars be spent for smaller, upcountry hospitals and clinics supported by a mid-size hospital in Monrovia. This might have antagonized the government, but it would have shown Liberians that we were committed to the continued broadening of the popular base of government. Similarly, our assistance to Liberian schools was unwisely concentrated in Monrovia.

Secondly, our advisers assigned to the various ministries could have filled the watch-dog role that a free press serves in a developed democracy. They should have been instructed to report to the U.S. mission any official abuses they observed. American officials who advised the Liberian police knew, through the police grapevine, of brutal interrogation techniques, abuse of power by senior police, and foul detention facilities. American personnel tried to counter these trends through better training programs and by exerting pressure on police officials. Our embassy did not, however, systematically attempt to confront higher authorities in the Liberian government with evidence of these abuses, or exert pressure to put a stop to them.

Another omission was our failure to react when local politics interfered with programs we supported. For instance, we did nothing when a Peace Corps volunteer was transferred for trying to do his job. The volunteer had attempted to resolve priorities between two road building projects for which he was responsible by arranging a meeting between the leaders of two clans. This did not please the district commissioner, who had been playing one clan off against the other to protect his own base. The interior ministry transferred the volunteer to the other end of the country. Nobody on the Peace Corps staff or in the U.S. embassy protested.

We also should have monitored and countered influence-buying by major American companies investing in Liberia. American missions are not encouraged to report such behavior, even though these corporations are often obstacles to promoting open, democratic institutions. In Liberia, a major bank and a rubber company, among others, employed the law firm of the speaker of the house, each paying a monthly retainer of $2,000 for very little legal work. Even such relatively commonplace corruption can become fodder for anti-American factions within a country, and frustrate our efforts to nudge local officials in the right direction. A brave ambassador could have raised the problem locally with the companies, or sent such information to Washington and urged the State Department to raise the issue with the companies' home offices. But it was never done.

Foreign pay-offs won't stop until there is joint action among the major trading nations. But meanwhile we have to stop them when they give our country a black eye. Our foreign service officers are better situated than anyone to blow the whistle, if only they were not so reluctant to do so.

Even if Tubman and Tolbert had continued to halt the progress towards democracy, they could not have ignored *all* complaints by their principal supplier of assistance. Most important, by setting a pattern of discussing sensitive political issues with Tubman, we could have continued such discussions with Tolbert and his brother without implying a lack of confidence in them during their accession to power. But by the late 1960s, American dialogue with Tubman had

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verged on sterility, consisting largely of meetings on such subjects as next year's budget or an upcoming U.N. vote—not on how the U.S. could help expand his nation-building initiatives. If the discussion route failed, we still could have pressured Tolbert to clean up his act—by cutting aid, inspiring congressional inquiries, briefing journalists, and the like. In short, we should have engaged in a lot more "political action."

But we allowed the situation to deterioriate because of our own cast of mind. On the one hand was the "liberal" impulse that deemed it inappropriate for Westerners to seek to guide the political development of a small, backward country. The conservative view was that it didn't really matter who ran Liberia, as long as the country remained in the "Western camp." (This view was epitomized by the foreign service officer who once told me we needed more "little black fascists" in Africa.) Others were passive because of their sense of the magnitude of the problem. Above all was the bureaucratic inertia of American officials in Liberia and in Washington, bolstered by their knowledge that Liberia was only one of many small countries competing for policymakers' attentions.

Quiet American

In other countries, what form should our "political action" take? In contrast to the more controversial covert operations with which he has come to be associated, William Casey has also proposed a "nation building" strategy. In a recent speech in Fulton, Missouri, the CIA director urged America to foster "the infrastructure of democracy, the system of a free press, unions, political parties, universities, which allows a people to choose its own ways." With Tubman, this approach might well have been effective. However, Casey's strategy is doomed to fail with more recalcitrant regimes. His notion of applying pressure is limited largely to demands "tactfully and privately" delivered "that our friends observe certain standards of behavior with regard to basic human rights," along with "land reforms, corruption, and the like." Tolbert might have listened to private lectures by our ambassador on his and his brother's acquisitive abuse of power, but if a leader is not willing to listen we should make clear that we have ways of embarrassing the regime if he doesn't respond—and that we are willing to use them. Demands "privately delivered" to countries like South Africa and the Philippines seem to have fallen on deaf ears—and have failed to identify the United States with change and progress in local eyes. For all its shortcomings, the Carter human rights policy benefited the subjects of repressive regimes throughout the world. There is no reason that public displays of displeasure cannot be used to encourage the democratizing of the political process as well.

In extreme cases, where prolonged repression has already built up a potentially dangerous head of steam, the CIA has a valid and useful function. It is not the stereotyped "bad guy" role of helping local security services ferret out opponents of the regime; but rather, the quiet role of establishing contact and working with the opposition. It's worth recalling that the CIA has played such roles in the past. Liberals tend to forget this now; memories of Kissinger's and Nixon's flawed "Track II" and the heavy-handed machinations by American business in Chile overshadow the CIA's positive role in supporting the Christian Democrats of Eduardo Frei as an alternative to radicals on the right or the left. We helped save democracy in Italy in similar fashion in the turmoil of the late 1940s. Whispering campaigns and street demonstrations to bring pressure upon a recalcitrant regime are also possibilities.

There is another valid role for the CIA in our relations with repressive regimes: to counter extreme right-wing groups such as the "death squads" in El Salvador. It's been naive to suppose that protests by our ambassador to the Salvadoran government would be effective. The balance of power there is too tenuous, the courts themselves too threatened by the death squads, and the military looms too darkly in the background. The CIA should have been trying to penetrate the squads and their command structure (not assisting these squads, as some evidence has suggested). More important, we should be willing to do something with the information that results from such efforts, even if it proves embarrassing to the government. Our agents could publicize the names of both killers and targeted victims, give advance notice of operations, discredit the death squads by forgeries—whatever is necessary to destroy their terrible effectiveness.

Of course, it's not possible to dispatch the CIA to every oppressed nation on earth where such action may be desirable. But in countries where we are involved for better or worse—El Salvador for example—the CIA *can* serve a useful role. On the other hand, the CIA should rely much less

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upon "covert" operations—political or paramilitary—in the Third World that are inherently overt to those against whom they are directed. Harry Rositzke, a former Soviet expert with the CIA, suggested (among others) in *The Washington Post* that if Nicaragua's ports had to be mined, it should have been a military, not a CIA, function. If we are not proud of such actions—if we aren't willing to take open responsibility for them—then we shouldn't do them. Covert operations encourage an administration to wade into foreign commitments that the American public doesn't know about and ultimately will not support. It is policy-making by back room elites. When foreign policy is out in the open, it is more likely to be what the American people want. A tighter rein on covert actions would be an effective way to ward off that national bugaboo—another Vietnam.

Generally, covert operations are most suited for small-scale, short-term projects that do not become institutionalized—infiltrating the Salvadoran death squads to undo them would be a prime example. Sometimes we need to resort to such actions when our open support would embarrass those we seek to help. But it is far better to go public in support of an Aquino (whose followers are generally pro-American) than to prop up covertly a Ferdinand Marcos.

After all, isn't this where our foreign service comes in? Most of what the CIA does—especially the gathering of information—the foreign service is supposed to do in the first place. There wouldn't be as much *need* for the CIA if more foreign service officers were doing their jobs—if they weren't afraid to apply political leverage in the right direction or to displease top officials in their host countries. (Frequently, by the time the CIA gets involved, it's too late anyway.) But this kind of intervention requires a president who encourages State Department employees, from the ambassador down to the 32-year-old political officer on his first assignment, to take risks. This in turn means standing up for those employees when an unhappy, corrupt regime tries to send them packing.

When the officials on the ground feel that their promotions will come from taking the initiative rather than waiting for their duty tour to end, we will have effected a true revolution in American foreign policy. It's a revolution that, in the long term, is the best strategy for promoting the kind of revolution we enjoyed two centuries ago—and for avoiding an altogether more unpleasant type of revolution later on. ■